

Impersonal passives in English and Norwegian

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Abstract

This chapter investigates passive constructions with an expletive subject, labelled as impersonal passives. The English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus (ENPC) provides material for comparison across both constructions and languages. The extracted dataset shows a higher frequency of impersonal passives in Norwegian, chiefly due to two patterns that English does not have, i.e. passives with intransitive verbs and transitive verbs which retain their postverbal complement in the passive. The study considers the communicative functions of the constructions, the process types of the passivized verbs, the expression of agency, and the thematic structure of clauses with impersonal passives, finding both differences and similarities. Translations between the languages are, however, most often non-congruent, even with extraposition and parentheticals, which exist in both languages.

Keywords: impersonal passive, expletive subject, extraposition, English/Norwegian

1. Introduction

This investigation concerns passive clauses with an expletive subject, i.e. English *it* and Norwegian *det*. Some such passives have been discussed as cases of (obligatory) extraposition (e.g. Quirk *et al.* 1985; Huddleston & Pullum 2002; Kaltenböck 2005), i.e. the type exemplified in (1), others as impersonal passives with or without a presentative function (e.g. Faarlund *et al.* 1997; Ebeling 2000), such as those in (2) and (3).¹

¹ The examples are from the English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus (Section 3). In each case the original appears before its translation. Norwegian examples are followed by a literal translation marked “Lit.”, where the expletive subject is represented as DET to avoid choosing between *it* and *there* (see below). The tags after the examples refer to corpus texts; those ending in ‘T’ are from translations. Italics have been added for emphasis.

- (1) *It was acknowledged* that Harriet and David had a gift for this kind of thing. (DL1)
Det var vedtatt at Harriet og David hadde en egen evne til dette. (DL1T)
 Lit: ‘DET was agreed that Harriet and David had a special gift for this’
- (2) ...he was broad of brow and chest, *it is said*, and when young excelled in wrestling. (JH1)
 Han var bred over brystet og pannen, *sies det*, og i sin ungdom utmerket han seg som bryter. (JH1T)
 Lit: ‘He was broad across the chest and brow, says_{PASS} DET, and in his youth...’
- (3) *Det ble tent* en lykt. (KAL1)
 Lit: ‘DET was lit a lantern.’
 A lantern was lit. (KAL1T)
- (4) *Det ble ledd* og konversert. (HW2)
 Lit: ‘DET was laughed and conversed.’
 There was laughter and conversation. (HW2T)

The extraposition type typically involves a verbal or mental process and an extraposed *that*-clause and occurs in similar form in English and Norwegian, as demonstrated by the original and translation in (1). The construction in (2) resembles extraposition, but instead of introducing a *that*-clause, the passive clause is interpolated in another clause (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 896). The types illustrated by (3) and (4) appear not to exist in English, unlike in other Germanic languages, see e.g. Abraham & Leiss (2006) for German and Johansson & Rawoens (2019) for Dutch and Swedish. These impersonal passives can occur with a variety of verbs in transitive as well as intransitive patterns, as in (3) and (4), respectively. In the case of transitive verbs, as in (4), the object of the agnate active appears as a postverbal complement of the verb and the subject position is taken by an expletive pronoun, similarly to the construction in (1). The expletive subject *det* in (3) and (4) is formally identical to the one used in the Norwegian translation of *it* in (1), but also to the expletive subject corresponding to *there* in presentatives (Ebeling 1999: 73; Faarlund *et al.* 1997: 846; Sjøfteland 2014: 34).

According to a.o. Abraham & Leiss (2006) and Engdahl & Laanemets (2015) only the types shown in (3) and (4) constitute impersonal passives

proper. However, these constructions have obvious formal and functional similarities with the extraposition in (1) and the parenthetical in (2), having an expletive subject, a passive verb phrase, and hardly ever an agentive PP. Like e.g. Fredriksson (2016: 50), I therefore consider (1)-(4) to represent subtypes of impersonal passives.

The present study uses the English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus (ENPC) to explore passives with expletive *it* or *det* as subject, focusing on the various construction types that exist in both languages. The study also examines the process types of the main verbs of the passives and the extent to which agency is expressed. Furthermore, I will discuss the information structure of impersonal passives, since, unlike ordinary passives, the impersonal type does not thematize a non-actor participant, but replaces an agentive subject with one that is semantically empty (Fredriksson 2016: 50). Finally, I consider how the passives are translated between English and Norwegian and what the translations can reveal about the constructions in both languages. By studying the four types of impersonal passive both together and cross-linguistically, which is rarely done, I hope to gain new insights into differences and commonalities regarding their experiential, interpersonal and textual properties.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents and discusses some previous work on the constructions covered by this study, as well as the diverging views on the term “impersonal passive”. Section 3 outlines the material, method and classification framework used in the analysis. The English and the Norwegian constructions are compared in Section 4, which presents and discusses the results of the contrastive analysis, while Section 5 looks at the translations of the constructions between English and Norwegian. Section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

2. Previous work

The constructions included here in the term *impersonal passive* share two central features of passive constructions, namely having the passive form of the verb phrase and a non-agentive subject (Biber *et al.* 1999: 475). However, they are distinguished from prototypical passives in that the subject is an expletive pronoun rather than a non-agentive participant from an agnate clause in the active (see Keizer, this volume). Abraham & Leiss (2006: 502) argue that “the impersonal passive does not involve any passive semantics”.

Instead they consider such passives to be “derived from one-place arguments where the demoted subjects of these constructions carry the features [+AGENT], [+HUMAN]” (ibid.). Abraham & Leiss’s (2006: 513) definition of the impersonal passive does not, as mentioned above, include the extraposition type shown in (1). As the impersonal passive “can be construed from imperfective predications only” (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 502), it carries imperfective meaning. The combination of the expletive subject and the passive verb form also produces a reduction in the valency of the predicate to the exclusion of an agent subject (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 514). German impersonal passives, such as *Es wurde getanzt* ‘it was danced’, cannot be translated into an English passive, but rather by a *there*-construction (Abraham & Leiss 2006: 502-503).

In their discussion of the English passive in general, Biber *et al.* (1999: 938) find that short passives far outnumber long ones. The possibility of omitting the agent participant is taken to be the “main purpose of the short dynamic passive”. The impersonal passive is arguably more remote from an agnate active construction than a prototypical passive containing an agentive adjunct and thereby “all the information that would be expressed in the corresponding active construction” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 943). This may be a reason why long passives (with an expressed agent) appear to be even less common with impersonal passives (e.g. Engdahl & Laanemets 2015, Fredriksson 2016: 50). Only one example of a long impersonal passive is presented in Granger (1983: 214), namely *It was suggested by Mr Berry* While not discussing this example separately, Granger comments on the fact that impersonal passives, “introduced by anticipatory *it* and followed by a *that*-clause ... or an infinitive” (1983: 186), may occur with verbs of cognition and perception in cases where “a generalized experiencer is disposed of by means of the agentless passive” (1983: 214). Svartvik’s (1966: 183) list of verbs that occur in this type of construction also shows a predominance of verbal and mental predicates.

Structures such as *It is said that...* can be regarded as a case of obligatory extraposition because “the corresponding non-extraposed version does not occur” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1392). Svartvik (1966: 144) is less categorical about the impossibility of non-extraposed variants of *it is said that* constructions, claiming instead that “proleptic *it* as passive clause subject disappears in transformation to active”. The idea of obligatory extraposition is rejected by Seppänen & Herriman (2002), who argue that the *that*-clause is an internal complement of the verb (2002: 57) and that the expletive *it* is of

the empty type that also occurs in e.g. time and weather expressions (2002: 35). In a similar vein, Davidse & Van linden (2020) are critical of viewing constructions such as *it/there is a/no wonder that* as extraposition because this term seems to entail that they are derived from a non-extraposed variant even if no non-extraposed variant may be available or acceptable. They point out that the construction can be grammaticalized and subjectified to convey modal and evidential meaning (2020: 82, 98).

Kaltenböck (2005: 146), on the other hand, considers the *it is said that* construction to be a case of extraposition, singling out a group of matrix predicates that contain “reporting verbs or message conveying verbs” before the extraposed clause. The discourse function of such matrix predicates is to mark the content of the *that*-clause as coming from an external but unspecified source, thereby “reducing the speaker’s responsibility with regard to the actual truth of the statement made by the complement clause” (Kaltenböck 2005: 147). Similarly, the *it is said that* construction is discussed as subject extraposition and a case of “impersonal projecting *it*” by Gómez-González (2001: 124, 269), who also notes that the non-extraposed counterpart is normally not available. The communicative effect of the construction is to depersonalize the matrix predicate as a result of the impersonal *it* in subject position and to ascribe the claim in the extraposed clause to an unspecified source (Gómez-González 2001: 272).

The Norwegian passive has two distinct realizations – one morphological, marked by the verbal suffix *-s*, and one periphrastic with the auxiliary *bli* (‘become’). Hence, the two clauses *Det redigeres et festskrift* and *Det blir redigert et festskrift* can both be glossed as ‘It is edited a festschrift’ (or more idiomatically, ‘A festschrift is edited’). The Norwegian morphological passive is rarely used in the preterite, but occurs more freely in the infinitive and the present tense (Engdahl & Laanemets 2015: 147). To the extent that the two forms differ in meaning, the morphological passive is more often associated with habitual or iterative meaning (Faarlund *et al.* 1997: 513-514; Engdahl & Laanemets 2015: 133). Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian differ as to the use and distribution of the morphological vs. the periphrastic passive, most importantly in that the periphrastic passive is rare in Swedish, but the preferred form in Danish and Norwegian (Engdahl & Laanemets 2015: 130-131). Impersonal passives can occur with transitive, intransitive, and prepositional verbs in all three languages. They characteristically refer to an activity performed by a human agent, which, however, is seldom expressed (Engdahl & Laanemets 2015: 110). In a similar

vein, Áfarli (2006: 380) argues that (impersonal) passivization depends on “the possibility of an agent reading” of the verb.

Norwegian passive sentences can get the formal subject *det* ‘it/there’ if no constituent of the active clause is (or can be) used as a subject in the passive (Faarlund *et al.* 1997: 845). This constitutes the impersonal passive in sentences such as *Det ble arbeidet i hagen* ‘DET was worked in the garden’. The formal subject is said to have the same properties as the formal subject in presentatives. In the case of a transitive verb with a postverbal NP, as in *Det ble skutt en elg* ‘DET was shot a moose’, this NP will normally be indefinite, as in presentatives (Faarlund *et al.* 1997: 846). Making a stronger claim than Engdahl & Laanemets (2015), Faarlund *et al.* (1997: 847) argue that an agent phrase is normally not possible in passives with an expletive subject.

Søfteland (2014) primarily explores the syntax of Norwegian *det*-clefts but also describes other constructions with expletive *det*. Her definition of expletive *det* does not distinguish between its uses in extraposition, clefts and presentatives (Søfteland 2014: 34); however, the expletive *det* in impersonal passives with transitive and intransitive verbs has the dialectal variant *der* ‘there’ in some regions of Norway, which makes these constructions analogous to *there*-presentatives (Søfteland 2014: 122). Transitive impersonal passives have a post-verbal NP that may be regarded as a notional subject, e.g. *Det ble bygd et dokkehus i hagen* ‘DET was built a doll’s house in the garden’. Since such constructions have a non-expletive agnate where the presented entity is in subject position (*Et dokkehus ble bygd i hagen* ‘A doll’s house was built in the garden’), Søfteland (2014: 120) classifies them as presentatives. However, the intransitive construction, e.g. *Det ble dansa* ‘DET was danced’, does not have an NP that could become the subject of a non-expletive variant of the clause (Søfteland 2014: 122), and Søfteland reserves the term “impersonal passive” for these.

English and Swedish passives are compared in Fredriksson (2016), including the impersonal passive. This study is interesting to the present one because Swedish and Norwegian are similar enough to be mutually intelligible. The term “impersonal passive” is used with the same broad coverage as in the present study, comprising the extraposition-type that occurs in both English and Swedish and non-extraposed constructions in which the expletive *det* ‘it/there’ is followed by a transitive or intransitive verb (Fredriksson 2016: 72). Swedish impersonal passives are found to be more than twice as common as English ones in a parallel corpus of fiction and

non-fiction texts,² with the most frequent type being passives with an extraposed Subject (Fredriksson 2016: 73). In contrast, “the least frequent type, available only in Swedish, is the intransitive impersonal passive” (Fredriksson 2016: 74). These are sometimes translated into English presentatives with *there* (Fredriksson 2016: 180).

The formal and functional similarity with *there*-constructions is also why Ebeling (1999) includes certain Norwegian impersonal passives in his contrastive study of English and Norwegian presentatives. The presentative function is primarily found in passives with the expletive subject *det* followed by a transitive verb in the passive and the object of the agnate active, which is the entity being presented (Ebeling 1999: 104). His distinction echoes that of Johansson & Lysvåg (1987: 341), who use the term “passive presentatives” for Norwegian impersonal passives with transitive verbs. The reason why Johansson & Lysvåg (1987: 340) discuss the Norwegian construction in a pedagogical grammar of English is to warn students against transferring it to English. Norwegian impersonal passives with intransitive verbs are classified as cases of empty subject constructions, in which case “English must use a paraphrase, often with existential *there*” (Johansson & Lysvåg 1987: 339). Ebeling (1999: 138), however, finds that Norwegian impersonal passives with presentative function are often translated into English passive constructions with (part of) the postverbal NP as subject. Contrary to Johansson & Lysvåg’s advice cited above, less than 7% of the English translations involve a *there*-construction (Ebeling 1999: 139).

Johansson & Rawoens (2019: 8) compare impersonal passives in Swedish and Dutch, excluding the extraposition type. The same types of impersonal passives are found in both languages, but are significantly more frequent in Dutch (Johansson & Rawoens 2019: 12). Despite the availability of the construction in both languages, however, most impersonal passives are translated by a different pattern, especially in going from Dutch to Swedish, most characteristically one with a generic or impersonal pronoun subject (Johansson & Rawoens 2019: 19).

Swedish passive constructions with expletive *det* ‘it’ are discussed from a systemic-functional perspective by Thyberg (2020). *Det*-passives occur with material, mental and verbal processes (Thyberg 2020: 245). The construction conveys an air of objectivity since agency is unspecified (Thyberg 2020: 256) even if only intransitive constructions are explicitly

² Fredriksson’s study is based on a subset of the English-Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC).

termed impersonal (Thyberg 2020: 246). The lack of agency also gives more focus to the process (Thyberg 2020: 256).

In sum, the literature confirms a difference between English and Norwegian (as well as Danish, Swedish, German and Dutch) as to the existence of an impersonal passive with transitive and intransitive verbs. The construction most unanimously recognized as an impersonal passive is the intransitive type (Abraham & Leiss 2006; Søfteland 2014). The transitive type is often associated with a presentative function (Faarlund *et al.* 1997; Ebeling 1999), while the intransitive type may also be associated with imperfectivity (Abraham & Leiss 2006). The English impersonal passive tends to be discussed as a case of extraposition (though see e.g. Seppänen & Herriman 2002), and may not be regarded as a true impersonal passive in spite of the passive form of the verb phrase and the expletive subject. Nevertheless, the term “impersonal passive” is found with all four types of constructions (e.g. Granger 1983; Ebeling 1999; Fredriksson 2016), and Standard Norwegian uses the expletive subject *det* in all the constructions. The disagreement about classification seems to reflect differences in both form and function across the constructions, which will be explored in the following sections.

3. Material, method and classification scheme

3.1. *Corpus*

This study draws on the fiction part of the English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus, ENPC (Johansson 2007). The ENPC consists of 60 text extracts of 12,000 to 15,000 words in length, 30 in Norwegian and 30 in English, with translations into the other language. The corpus is bidirectional and balanced, thus having equal numbers of original texts in the two languages with translations into the other. Table 1 gives some details of the original texts in the corpus. For information on the text selection, see Johansson (2007: 12).

Table 1. The fiction part of the English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus (original texts only)

	Number of words	Number of texts	Mean text length	S.D.
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English original	fiction	419,449	30	13,981.63	1,342
Norwegian original	fiction	407,835	30	13,594.50	1,578

3.2. *Extraction method*

Searches were made in original texts in a part-of-speech tagged version of the ENPC using the PerlTCE search interface (Johansson 2007: 16). The English material was retrieved by searching for the lemma BE preceded by *it* and followed by a past participle, both at a distance of maximum two words. In the case of Norwegian, separate searches were made for the morphological and the periphrastic passive. Because of the Germanic verb-second (V2) constraint (Los & Dreschler 2012), the expletive *det* had to be allowed to occur either before or after the finite part of the VP. Thus, the morphological passive was retrieved by searching for words ending in *-s*, tagged as verbs and preceded or followed by *det* within two words. For the *bli*-passive, the lemma BLI ‘be, become’ was the main search term, with *det* occurring one or two words before or immediately after it, and a past participle verb occurring within a distance of three words from BLI. The resulting concordances were cleaned up manually to remove all instances that did not represent the impersonal passive, such as cases of referential instead of expletive *it/det*.

3.3 *Classification scheme*

Each occurrence of the impersonal passive was annotated for process type of the verb in the passive construction (e.g. material, mental, cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 214 ff), type of syntactic pattern it occurred with, its degree of congruence in translation (Johansson 2007: 25) and the corresponding expression in the translation.

Table 2. Syntactic patterns of impersonal passives

Pattern	Description	English example	Norwegian example
Extraposition	<i>it/det</i> + passive VP + clause	<i>It is said</i> that she left a vitriolic suicide note for Ted, ... (MD1) (MD1)	<i>Det sies</i> at hun etterlot et giftig selvmordsbrev til Ted, ... (MD1T)
Parenthetical	Extraposition-like without <i>that</i> -clause	... he was broad of brow and chest, <i>it is said</i> , ... (JH1)	Han var bred over brystet og pannen, <i>sies det</i> , ... (JH1T)
Transitive construction	The passive VP is transitive in the agnate active clause and retains a direct object.	N.A.	... <i>det ble sagt</i> noen lave ord. (LSC2) [‘DET was said some soft words.’]
Intransitive construction	The passive VP is intransitive in the agnate active clause.	N.A.	<i>Det ble ledd</i> og konversert. (HW2) [‘DET was laughed and conversed.’]

Table 2 displays the classification of the syntactic patterns found in the material. There are four types: extraposition, parenthetical, transitive constructions and intransitive constructions. The familiar term *extraposition* is used for lack of an established alternative, but without the assumption that there should exist an agnate, non-extraposed variant. The extraposition construction may have an agnate passive in which the subject of the *that*-clause is raised to main clause subject position, e.g. *She is said to have left a vitriolic suicide note...* (discussed as evidential passive matrices in Noël 2001 and as NCI-constructions in Anthonissen 2021; see Noël, this volume, for deontic NCIs). This option is also available for Norwegian morphological passives, but more marginal for the periphrastic passive.³ Similarly, as noted

³ “sies å” and “BLI sagt å” (‘be said to’) produced 2691 and 45 matches, respectively, in the 100-million-word Corpus for Bokmål Lexicography, LBK, <https://www.hf.uio.no/iln/om/organisasjon/tekstlab/prosjekter/lbk/>.

above, the Norwegian transitive construction has an agnate “regular” passive without *det*, e.g. *Noen lave ord ble sagt* ‘some soft words were spoken’, cf. Sjøfteland (2014). As this study focuses on passives with *det*, such agnates will not be given detailed attention, but see Section 4.5.

Compared to extraposition and the transitive and intransitive patterns (see Section 2), the parenthetical use does not seem to have been given much attention in the literature (but see Biber *et al.* 1999: 865). This pattern is similar to extraposition, but instead of being a matrix for an extraposed *that*-clause, the *det*-passive is inserted parenthetically in an anchor clause (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 896). The example in Table 2 contains an impersonal passive in clause-final position (placement in medial position is also possible). As the example illustrates, this construction exists in both English and Norwegian. Similar parentheticals related to extraposition structures with *seem* and *appear* are discussed in López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2014). The parenthetical clause is sometimes prefaced by *so* or *as* (López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2014: 41), e.g. *The incendiarists — so it was said — were city councillors...* (JC1). The patterns with transitive and intransitive verbs were attested only in Norwegian, and as the English transliterations indicate, would be ungrammatical in English (see also Johansson & Lysvåg 1987: 339; Engdahl & Laanemets 2015: 132).

Congruence in translation is defined by Johansson (2007: 23) as the use of a form belonging to the same (grammatical) category as the corresponding word/phrase in the source text. Importantly, congruence pertains only to similarity of form and does not imply equivalence of meaning, which is a different matter. For the present purposes, a congruent translation is one that retains the structural properties of the original, as in the examples of extraposition and parentheticals in Table 2.

3.4. *Comparison and tertium comparationis*

The initial cross-linguistic comparison uses the ENPC as a comparable corpus, i.e. one in which (original) texts in two languages have been selected according to the same criteria (Johansson 2007: 10; Hasselgård 2020: 188). English and Norwegian are similar enough that they can be analysed according to the same classification scheme; hence, lexicogrammatical class constitutes another aspect of the *tertium comparationis*. By considering impersonal passives in original texts only, the contrastive analysis avoids the potential pitfall of including translations in which the source text may be

shining through (Ebeling & Ebeling 2013: 42). The final part of the study takes translations into account, albeit only from the point of view of the source text. That is, no separate search was performed for impersonal passives in translated English and Norwegian, and the translation study simply aims to find out how the constructions are rendered in the other language.

4. Contrastive analysis

4.1. Overall frequencies and patterns

As already indicated, the impersonal passive is much more frequent in Norwegian than in English. The frequency and distribution of the construction are given in Table 3. The frequency difference between the languages is even greater than that found by Fredriksson (2016: 73) between English and Swedish, where English impersonal passives were just under half as frequent as English ones.⁴ Not only are impersonal passives over three times more frequent in Norwegian than in English fiction, they also occur in a greater proportion of the texts (83% in Norwegian vs. 53% in English).

Table 3. Frequencies of impersonal passives in ENPC fiction (original texts)

	No. of passives	Per 10k	No. of texts (of 30)	Min-max per text
English fiction	31	0.77	16	1-6
Norwegian fiction	97	2.40	25	1-13

The Norwegian material comprises both the morphological passive (40%) and the periphrastic passive (60%), similar to the frequencies reported in Engdahl & Laanemets (2015: 131). The *s*-passive seems to be promoted by certain lexemes: well over half of the Norwegian *s*-passives represent the verbs *tenke* ‘think’, *fortelle* ‘tell’ and *si* ‘say’; no other verbs occur more than twice among the *s*-passives. The *bli*-passive does not show any similar lexical preference: the only verb to occur more than twice is *si* (13 instances).

⁴ Fredriksson’s (2016: 73) total figures for English are not comparable in spite of the similarities between the English-Swedish Parallel Corpus, and the ENPC (Johansson 2007: 12) because her subset of the ESPC includes both non-fiction and translated texts (Fredriksson 2016: 10).

Figure 1 displays the dispersion of impersonal passives across corpus texts, including those that do not contain any instances of the construction. The box plot on the left includes all the construction types listed in Table 2 and shows that the mean and the median frequencies as well as the interquartile range are far greater in Norwegian.⁵ The plot on the right comprises only extraposition and parentheticals, which occur in both languages. It shows a much more similar distribution across the languages although Norwegian has a lower median and a higher mean than English. Both plots indicate that there is great variation across texts and authors in the frequency of impersonal passives.

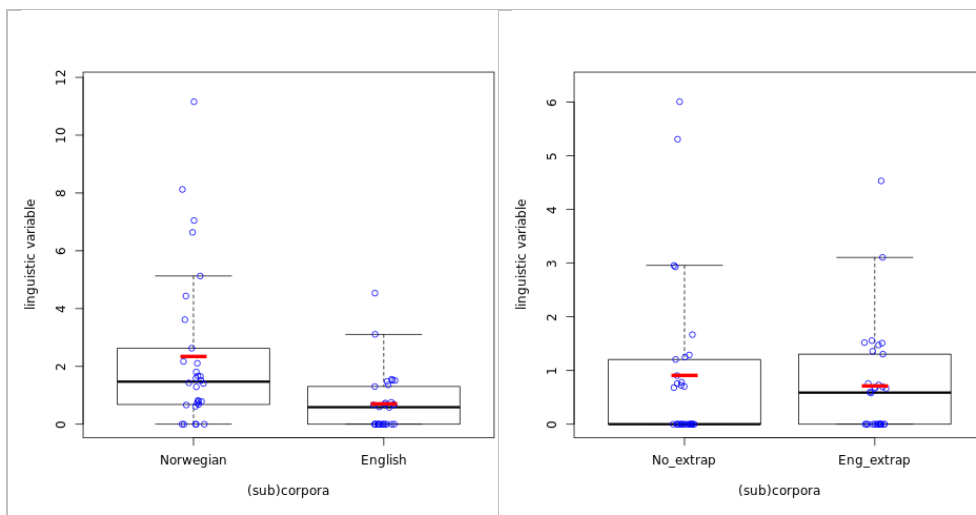


Figure 1. Dispersion of all impersonal passives (left) and only extraposition and parentheticals (right) in Norwegian and English. Normalized frequencies per 10,000 words per text.

4.2. Syntactic patterns

As discussed in Section 3.3, impersonal passives are found with the patterns extraposition, parentheticals, and (non-extraposed) clauses with intransitive and transitive verbs. Figure 2 shows the distribution of these construction types in Norwegian and English.

⁵ The plots were produced with Lancaster Stats Tools online, <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/stats/> (Brezina 2018).

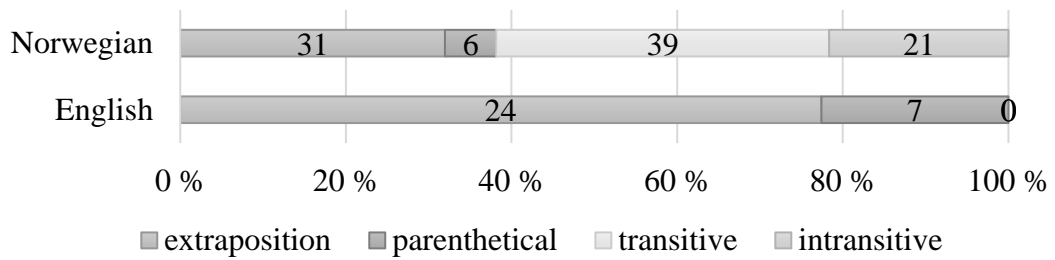


Figure 2. The proportional distribution of syntactic patterns in impersonal passives.

As expected, only extraposition and parentheticals are found in English, with extraposition being by far most frequent. Since the English and the Norwegian corpora are similar in size (Table 1), the raw frequencies given in the bars can be compared directly. Figure 2 thus also shows that the extraposition pattern is marginally more frequent in Norwegian than in English while the numbers of parentheticals are similar. The extraposition pattern is discussed in more detail below (Section 4.2), but parentheticals will be given some attention here. Examples (5) and (6) may serve as illustrations.

- (5) Between 1632 and 1633, *it is reported*, young Rembrandt executed fifty paintings in a deluge of commissions ... (JH1)
 Mellom 1632 og 1633, *opplyses det*, utførte unge Rembrandt femti malerier i en flom av oppdrag ... (JH1T)
 Lit: ‘Between 1632 and 1633, is DET informed...’
- (6) De fryktelige krigerne fra nord strømmet inn over hele verdensflata, *ble det fortalt*. (TTH1)
 Lit: ‘The terrible warriors from north swarmed in over the whole world-plain, was DET told.’
 The feared warriors from the north had swarmed over most of the world, *they were told*, plundering, ravaging and murdering. (TTH1T)

As noted in Section 3.3, parentheticals are similar to extraposition, but they are not matrix predicates with an extraposed clause. Instead they are interpolated in the middle of another clause, as in (5) or at the end of it, as in (6).⁶ Medial position is most common in English (six out of seven examples)

⁶ Davidse & Van linden (2020: 97) discuss a similar parenthetical variant of the full predicate constructions (*it*)/(*there*) *be* + NP followed by a complement clause.

and end position in Norwegian (four of the six examples). The parentheticals have a peripheral status in the clause they occur in, as comment clauses functioning as stance adverbials (Biber *et al.* 1999: 865). The main meaning of the stance adverbial is evidential – to mark the proposition as coming from another source than the speaker, although the referent of the source is not specified. According to Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 896), such parentheticals “serve to weaken the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the anchor proposition”, while López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2014: 38) note that such evidential predicates often occur parenthetically. In other words, the speakers of (5) and (6) have picked up stories/reports from unnamed sources, and convey the content, possibly – but not necessarily – without taking full responsibility for its accuracy (Kaltenböck 2005: 147). It should be noted that the Norwegian comment clauses in (5) and (6) have inverted word order and thus resemble reporting clauses placed after the reported content.

Non-extraposed clauses with transitive and intransitive verbs occur only in Norwegian. The transitive pattern is regarded by Ebeling (1999: 104) as a full presentative construction, “as long as the object is indefinite”, thus performing the same discourse function as a *there*-presentative in addition to the functions it shares with other passives. This function is illustrated in (7), with an indefinite NP being introduced into the discourse at the end of the sentence and the translation employing a presentative construction. However, not all the translations are so clearly presentative; see further Ebeling (1999: 139) and Section 5.

- (7) Den kvelden *ble det holdt* en stor fest med bål og ringdans. (SH1)
 Lit: ‘That night *was* DET *held* a big party ...’
 That night there was a great festival with fires and circle dancing.
 (SH1T)

The intransitive pattern is the second most frequent one in Norwegian (Figure 2). Instances of this type are not considered presentatives in Ebeling (1999), as they lack an entity to be introduced. The lack of postverbal complementation may encourage an imperfective reading of the predicate (Abraham & Leiss 2006) and give rhematic focus to the process, as in (8).

- (8) Det ble spist og drukket. (SH1)
 Lit: ‘DET was eaten and drunk.’
 ... the feasting began with eating and drinking. (SH1T)

However, intransitives can also include postverbal elements, for example in the form of a prepositional phrase, and may thus resemble the transitive pattern with presentative function. In (9), which contains two intransitive *det*-passives, the clause-final adjuncts are likely to get rhematic focus; see further Section 4.5.

- (9) I perioder oppfordres det *til små barneflokker og prevensjon*, i andre perioder snakkes det lite *om det*. (TB1)
 Lit: ‘In periods DET is encouraged *to small child-numbers* and birth control, in other periods DET is talked little *about it*.’
 Sometimes they advise smaller families and birth control, then come periods when the matter seems forgotten. (TB1T)

4.3. Process types in impersonal passives

Previous descriptions of the English impersonal passive find that the verbs in them tend to denote cognition and perception (Granger 1983: 214) as well as reporting (Kaltenböck 2005: 146); see also Svartvik (1966: 183). The present material confirms this pattern. The analysis of the verbs in terms of process types (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 214ff) reveals that only mental and verbal processes are found in English, while the Norwegian impersonal passives also have a substantial proportion of material process verbs (processes of ‘doing’ and ‘happening’; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 224), as shown in Table 4.⁷ The findings are consistent with those of Thyberg (2020: 233) for Swedish.

Table 4. Process types in impersonal passives in English and Norwegian (raw numbers)

	English		Norwegian	
material	0	0%	46	47.4%
mental	10	32.3%	15	15.5%
verbal	21	67.7%	36	37.1%
Total	31		97	

⁷ Two instances of behavioural processes are included in the material process group in Norwegian.

The Norwegian material contains very few recurrent material process verbs. There are four instances of *gjøre* ‘do’, one of which is shown in (10). *Bygge* ‘build’, *holde* ‘hold, keep’, *servere* ‘serve’ and *skape* ‘create’ occur twice each, which means that 34 material verb lexemes occur only once with the impersonal passive in this material.

- (10) Jeg kunne godt tenke meg å stille opp hvis det er en streikebryter som skal bankes, eller hvis *det skal gjøres noe praktisk*. (JM1)
 Lit: ‘...or if DET needs to be done something practical’
 I can imagine myself obliging if it’s a strike-breaker to be bashed, or if what’s got to be done is something practical. (JM1T)

Mental verbs denote cognition and perception as well as desideration and emotion (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 216); however, only the former two are found in the present material. Verbal processes comprise verbs of saying. Like cognition and perception verbs they are able to *project* a clause (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 249). That is, they introduce reported speech and thought when the verb is complemented by a *that*-clause, as in (11) and (12), which illustrate a verbal and a mental process, respectively. This actually distinguishes the impersonal passives from the more typical extraposition with *be* (or other copular verbs) where the *that*-clause is not projected by the predicator.

- (11) *Det fortelles* at han ble tatt til fange av et fremmed folk, og at han måtte slite som trell i mange år før han endelig ble satt fri. (TTH1)
 Lit: ‘DET is told that he was taken for prisoner by a foreign people...’
 Legend says that he was captured by a foreign people, and that he was a slave for many years before he was finally set free. (TTH1T)
- (12) ... *it was assumed* my father would become a priest,... (TH1)
 ... tok man det for gitt at min far ville bli prest,... (TH1T)
 Lit: ‘...took one DET for granted that my father would become a priest’

Figure 3 shows the proportions of mental and verbal processes in the material when other processes (in Norwegian) are ignored. The proportions are very

similar between English and Norwegian, which suggests that *it*-constructions with mental and verbal process verbs behave similarly in the two languages.

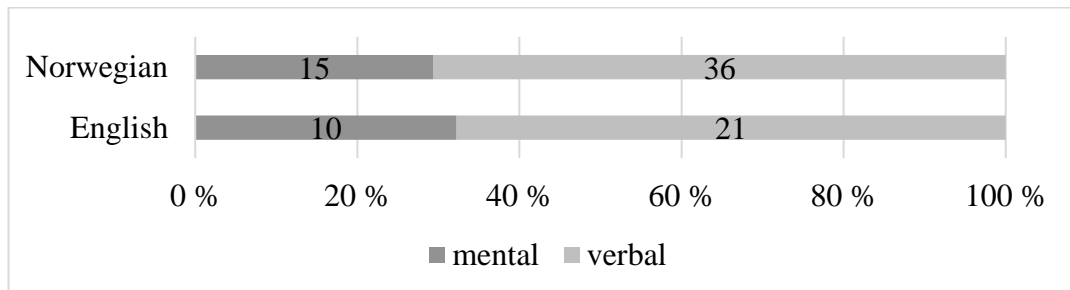


Figure 3. The proportional distribution of mental and verbal processes in impersonal passives

Norwegian mental verbs show more recurrence than material ones, with *tenke* ‘think’ occurring ten times and *beslutte* ‘decide’ twice; in English, however, only *know* is repeated (twice). Verbal processes have recurrent lexemes in both languages. Norwegian *si* ‘say’ has 17 occurrences, *fortelle* ‘tell’ nine, and *snakke* ‘talk’ and *understreke* ‘underline’ two each. English *say* occurs eight times and *agree* three. The repeated use of *tenke* is entirely due to the idiomatic phrase *det kan tenkes* ‘it can be thought’, which occurs only with the *s*-passive. It may be argued that this phrase is grammaticalized into a modal marker (Davidse & Van linden 2020; Thyberg 2020), similar to *kanskje* ‘maybe’, though on the surface, clauses such as (13) – which is representative of the use of *det kan tenkes* in the dataset – are extraposition constructions with a projected idea.

- (13) Men *det kan tenkes* at du snubler over deg selv. (JG1)
 Lit: ‘But DET can be thought that you stumble over yourself’
 But you might stumble upon yourself one day. (JG1T)

The matrix clause of sentences such as (13) can be said to preface the projected clause with modal meaning and thereby have an interpersonal function. A similar claim can be made about extraposition constructions with *si/say* in the matrix clause, as shown in (14).

- (14) Alexander loved Homer, and *it is said* that he took with him into Asia an Iliad edited by Aristotle and that he kept it beneath his pillow. (JH1)

Alexander elsket Homer, og *det sies at* han tok med seg til Asia en Iliade redigert av Aristoteles, og at han hadde den liggende under hodeputen. (JH1T)

According to Davidse (1994: 273), projected reports are “representations of the linguistic content of a specific speech or thought act” and thereby closely associated with a sayer or a senser, in Halliday’s terms, i.e. with the agent participant in the verbal or mental process (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 311). They are furthermore “tactically and deictically dependent on the speech or thought act (Davidse 1994: 277). Obviously, in the prototypical case of projecting verbal and mental processes, the sayer or senser is included, as in *He says it needs mending* (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 520), thus implying that at least some of the responsibility for the content of the projected clause lies with the sayer (not just the speaker/writer who reports on the event). In the impersonal passive with extraposition, there is no sayer or senser, thus again the projected clause is prefaced simply by the verbal or mental process, marking it as coming from a source which is not identified or specified.

As speech reports are among the linguistic means of expressing information source (Aikhenvald 2018; Section 1.1.2), we can view the impersonal reporting clause as an evidential marker of hearsay in the same way as *det kan tenkes* can be viewed as a marker of modality. In the words of Herriman (2000: 212), extraposition “allows the writer to omit the source of the attitudinal meaning and to give it an appearance of objectivity and generality”.

4.4. Agency

There is only one instance in the entire dataset that contains an expressed agent with the impersonal passive, namely (15). The Norwegian translation, however, has not copied this structure, but uses an active clause with an agentive subject.

- (15) Aila was so quiet *it was irritably felt by others* that her beauty was undeserved. (NG1)
Aila var så stillferdig at andre ofte med en viss irritasjon følte at hennes skjønnhet var noe ufortjent. (NG1T)

Lit: 'Aila was so quiet that others often with a certain irritation felt that her beauty was something undeserved.'

None of the Norwegian impersonal passives are accompanied by an agent phrase in its most typical form, with the preposition *av*. However, the agent may be present in non-canonical form, as seen for instance in (16), where the complement of the preposition *mellom* 'between' is the only plausible agent of the action. More typically, however, the agent must simply be inferred from the context as being general, vague or irrelevant, or even the current speaker, as in (17). The English translation uses the first person pronoun as agentive subject, thereby making this inference explicit.

(16) Ingen hørte noen gang at det ble vekslet ukvemsord *mellom Jacob og Ingeborg*. (HW2)

Lit: 'Nobody heard ever that DET was exchanged abusive language between Jacob and Ingeborg'

Abusive language was never heard between Jacob and Ingeborg. (HW2T)

(17) Nå må det føyes til at dette er bare halve sannheta om Lars og oss. (JM1)

Lit: 'Now must DET be added that this is only ...'

I have to add that this is only half the truth about Lars and us. (JM1T)

There are also English examples similar to (16), as the translated version indicates, and other references to agency such as in (18), where the adverb *generally* indicates that the agent of the accepting was everybody. This is made explicit in the Norwegian translation, in which *det* must be interpreted as referential.

(18) It was *generally* accepted that Daddy and Bob Stanley, who was about Ty's age, didn't get along too well. (JSM1)

Det var noe alle visste at far min og Bob Stanley, som var omtrent på Tys alder, ikke kom særlig godt overens. (JSM1T)

Lit: 'It was something everybody knew that my father and Bob Stanley ...'

4.5. Information structure

Halliday (1970: 161) argues that the dissociation of the actor referent from the subject function, and thereby from an unmarked theme position, in a clause is the main reason for choosing the passive. However, as Fredriksson (2016: 50) notes:

Swedish impersonal passives rarely take an Agent, and if the passive is seen primarily as an Agent defocusing process, such impersonal passives pose no problem. The thematisation view, by contrast, taking the promotion of an active non-ACTOR to passive Subject/Theme position to be the main function, fails to handle impersonal passives since there is no non-ACTOR to promote – the passive Subject is semantically empty.

In fact, impersonal passives with a clause-initial expletive subject represent a thematic “pass option”, i.e., “an option *not* to make use of the thematic slot to foreground any particular type of meaning” (Berry 1995: 66). This is arguably the case with many passives of intransitive verbs such as (4) above, repeated here for convenience.

- (4) Det ble ledd og konversert. (HW2)
‘DET was laughed and conversed.’
There was laughter and conversation. (HW2T)

While presentatives typically have a nominal element in rhematic position, as in the English translation in (4), the impersonal passive offers a possibility of rhematizing a process congruently (non-metaphorically) in a presentative construction without resorting to nominalization, and without having to introduce any sort of agentive subject. A sentence such as (4) may thus be considered a presentative with a process as the presented entity. Intransitive passives that contain postverbal adjuncts, on the other hand, rhematize the adjunct, as seen in (8) above. In (19), where the agent is inferable from the context, rhematic focus falls on the clause-final time adjunct, while the initial locative *der* ‘there’ provides a spatial, cohesive link to the preceding sentence.

- (19) Senere skal jeg forklare hvordan dere kommer dere til Palmehaven. *Der skal det spilles* ved te-tid og på formiddagene. (EFH1)
 ‘There will DET be played at teatime and in the mornings.’
 I’ll tell you how to get to the Palm Court later on. You play there at teatime and in the mornings. (EFH1T)

Impersonal passives with transitive and intransitive verbs may thus be interpreted as rhematization devices which at the same time offer a pass option (Berry 1995) as regards agency and thematic content. The extraposition type of impersonal passive, by contrast, may be better seen in terms of thematization. In Thompson’s (2014: 156) view of extraposition as “thematized comment”, the theme is extended to include the first constituent with experiential meaning, which in the case of impersonal passives would be the predicator. Similarly, Gómez-González (2001: 27) finds that “subject extrapositions fulfil the communicative role of *foregrounding the modal expression thematically, by placing it in a clause superordinate to, and preceding, that expressing the rhematic and newsworthy proposition*” (emphasis in original). Thus in a sentence such as (20), the thematized meaning is arguably *rumoured*, which is also picked up in the form of a noun in the Norwegian translation. The thematized process can be taken to function interpersonally as a disclaimer with regard to the speaker’s responsibility for the truth value of the rhematic content, which is nevertheless the newsworthy part of the message.

- (20) *It was rumoured* that she herself was an indifferent cook... (PDJ3)
 Ryktet ville ha det til at hun selv ikke var interessert i matlaging... (PDJ3T)
 Lit: ‘The rumour would make it out that she herself was not interested in cooking’

This is entirely in line with Kaltenböck’s (2005: 147) view that the matrix clause in such constructions “is informationally weak and not really necessary for the correct processing of the message”, but serves the communicative function of presenting “the new information in the complement clause as not having originated with the speaker”. Given the feasibility of raising the subject of the *that*-clause in sentences such as (20), i.e. *She was rumoured to*

be an indifferent cook, the use of the *it*-construction represents a choice not to thematize a participant. The raised construction also has evidential meaning (Noël 2001; Anthonissen 2021: 182), but not in thematic position.

Not all impersonal passives have the expletive *det/it* as clause theme, as evidenced by examples (17) and (19) above. In fact, a striking proportion of the Norwegian impersonal passives have a marked theme, i.e. a referential constituent which precedes the (expletive) subject (Thompson 2014: 148). More precisely, 31 out of the 97 Norwegian examples have a marked theme, as against four out of the 31 English ones. The marked themes occur with transitive and intransitive passives as well as with extraposition, but not with parentheticals. Most of the marked themes are time and space adjuncts, which may tie in with the presentative function of transitive and intransitive impersonal passives. As discussed in connection with (19), the thematized adjunct may have a linking function in relation to the preceding context. It may also signal a shift or break in the text, as other initial adjuncts can do (Hasselgård 2010: 291-292). Example (21) shows that nominal elements too can occur as marked themes in Norwegian impersonal passives. In this case it seems that agent suppression is a major reason for choosing the construction, as well as thematization of the prepositional complement (cp. the agnate *Det må også fortelles om turen til Finnsnes* ‘DET must also be told about the trip to Finnsnes’).

(21) Turen til Finnsnes og tilbake igjen må det også fortelles om.
(JM1)

Lit: ‘The trip to Finnsnes and back again must DET also be told about’

The trip to Finnsnes and back must also be described. (JM1T)

The parenthetical construction differs from the extraposition pattern in never being sentence-initial. It is syntactically non-integrated, interpolated in either medial or end position in another clause (see (5) and (6) above). Parenthetically inserted adjuncts in medial position do not attract either thematic or rhematic focus and are thereby backgrounded (Hasselgård 2010: 107). It is also plausible that parenthetical passives in end position evade rhematic focus because they may appear more as afterthoughts than as an integrated part of the proposition, much like postposed reporting clauses, in which case “the quoted text is the main communicative point, and the reporting clause is tagged on at the end” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 924).

5. Translation correspondences

The degree of congruence in translations of impersonal passives differs between the two directions of translation. As Table 5 shows, almost half of the English impersonal passives get a congruent translation in Norwegian while the vast majority of Norwegian passives are translated non-congruently into English. This was expected, given the unavailability of transitive and intransitive impersonal passives in English. A small number of translations are marked as ‘Ø’ (zero) – these represent cases where the impersonal passive construction has not been translated at all (Johansson 2007: 25).

Table 5. Congruence in translation of impersonal passives (raw frequencies)

	English-Norwegian			Norwegian-English		
	con- gruent	non- congruent	Ø	con- gruent	non- congruent	Ø
Extraposition	11	13	0	8	23	0
Parenthetical	4	3	0	2	2	2
Transitive	-	-	-	0	36	3
Intransitive	-	-	-	0	21	0
	15	16	0	10	82	5

The proportions of congruent translations from English into Norwegian are very similar between parentheticals and extraposition constructions, in both cases close to 50%. In translation from Norwegian into English, the degree of congruence is smaller, even in the categories that exist in both languages.

In the non-congruent translations of intransitive passives, nine out of 21 were active constructions and nine were regular passives including a nonfinite one, and the remaining three were *there*-constructions, including example (3) above. Transitive passives were most often translated as regular passives with a referential subject (24 out of 39). In most cases this is an easily available option because the postverbal NP of the transitive *det*-passive presents itself as a good candidate for a passive subject, as in (22). Eight out of the 39 are translated as active constructions, as in (23), where an agentive subject is borrowed from the adverbial clause.

- (22) De dro litt i armene på hverandre, det ble sagt *noen lave ord*.
(LSC2)
Lit: ‘... DET was said some soft words.’

They tugged at each other's arms and *some soft words* were spoken. (LSC2T)

(23) Det ble ikke sagt mye mens de spiste. (HW1)

Lit: 'DET was not said much while they ate.'

They didn't talk much while they were eating. (HW1T)

(24) Mer ble det ikke sagt om Jos konfirmasjon. (KF2)

Lit: 'More was DET not said about Jo's confirmation.'

Nothing more was said on the subject of Jo's confirmation.

(KF2T)

In the case of (24) the original has the object in thematic position while the translation has the same referent in subject position in a regular passive. The translation hence turns a marked word order pattern into an unmarked one.

Even though the transitive *det*-passive is generally regarded as close to a presentative (Johansson & Lysvåg 1987; Søfteland 2014), only four of the 39 transitives in this material were translated as *there*-constructions, consistent with the findings of Ebeling (1999). So whereas the communicative function of this construction may be to introduce an entity into the discourse, this is not so salient as to make the presentative construction an automatic choice for translators.

The considerable degree of non-congruence with the constructions that are available in both languages is surprising. The translations of extraposition reveal that non-congruent Norwegian translations from English greatly prefer active constructions (nine out of 13 examples). Active constructions are also the most frequent choice in non-congruent English translations of extrapositions, but to a smaller extent (11 out of 23). Most of the remaining translations convey modal and evidential meanings in the form of modal auxiliaries and adverbs and predicatives (in extraposition constructions). Nine of the non-congruent English translations of Norwegian extrapositions concern the idiomatic *det kan tenkes*, discussed in Section 4.3 and exemplified in (13). Since the idiom does not have an obvious English equivalent, the translations typically contain a different kind of modal expression. However, non-congruence is not always caused by the lack of an equivalent expression in the other language. An example is given in (25), where an impersonal passive is translated as a regular passive, and the subject of the complement clause in the original is used as matrix clause subject. The change affects the thematic structure, going from an impersonal "pass option" to placing the speaker subject in theme position.

- (25) *It was suggested* that I should consult a solicitor. (DF1)
Jeg ble rådet til å snakke med en advokat. (DF1T)
Lit: 'I was advised to talk to a solicitor.'

It is possible that the impersonal passives, being on the whole rather rare, are perceived as marked constructions by translators. Thus translations into the less marked active constructions or regular passives may be a feature of the normalization process that has been claimed to take place in translation (but which has also been questioned, cf. Mauranen 2008).

6. Concluding remarks

This study has shown that impersonal passives differ between English and Norwegian as to their frequencies and construction types, as was expected. The greatest difference lies in the fact that English uses the impersonal passive construction only in the contexts of extraposition and parentheticals with verbal and mental process verbs. Norwegian, like the other Germanic languages (Abraham & Leiss 2006; Engdahl & Laanemets 2015), has impersonal passives with both transitive and intransitive verbs. These verbs chiefly represent material processes which imply (human) agency although the agent is almost always left unexpressed.

Although the constructions investigated here share the features of expletive subject and a passive verb phrase (and typically the omission of an agent), the analysis has confirmed that they differ in communicative functions. In the case of verbal and mental processes (in a matrix clause with extraposition and in parentheticals), a major function is to attribute a proposition to an external source, thereby reducing the speaker's responsibility for its accuracy (Kaltenböck 2005: 147). The passives with extraposition involve projection, which the similar-looking parentheticals do not. But both constructions have the communicative effect of marking modality and evidentiality (Thyberg 2020: 250). Transitive and intransitive impersonal passives, on the other hand, are more likely to have a presentative function: they may focus on a direct or prepositional object, an adjunct, or on the process itself.

However, the four constructions also share some functional characteristics. In terms of the ideational metafunction, the four patterns of

impersonal passives are alike in omitting the agent (actor, sayer or sensor) while retaining any other participants that may be required by the predicator. The removal of a participant from subject position gives the clause an impersonal flavour. At the interpersonal level, all the impersonal passives lack a referential subject which can have modal responsibility for the clause, i.e. the expletive subject is semantically empty (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 960). In extraposition constructions, the matrix predicate foregrounds epistemic and/or evidential meaning in a thematized comment (Thompson 2014: 156). Parentheticals express the same type of meanings, but they are not thematized. That is, they function as stance adverbials expressing doubt or certainty (i.e. epistemic meanings) or source of knowledge (i.e. evidential meaning), cf. Biber *et al.* (1999: 854-855).

There are further similarities between the various types of impersonal passive from the perspective of the textual metafunction. All the types represent the “pass option” as regards filling the subject theme with referential content (Berry 1995). A clause-initial expletive *it/det* also provides a thematic constituent with no information focus. In transitive and intransitive passives, the focus will then fall solely on the rheme, which is presumably why these patterns are well suited for the presentative function. However, as noted above, the extraposition construction can be regarded in terms of a thematized comment if the theme is extended to include the predicator. Hence, the projected clause is prefaced by epistemic or evidential meaning as a framework for its interpretation (Gómez-González 2001: 273). It may be noted, though, that a similar extension of the theme is less appealing in the case of especially intransitive impersonal passives, which might then be left with nothing other than a theme, which seems unsatisfactory in a non-elliptical clause. Finally it was noted that an unusual number of Norwegian impersonal passives had a marked theme, typically with an adjunct in clause-initial position. This might suggest that the impersonal constructions are used to achieve divided focus, by which the adjunct often has a discourse-organizing function while the rheme presents new information. The (formal) clause subject remains devoid of semantic content and cannot steal the attention from the thematic and rhematic constituents.

The present study has some obvious limitations as regards its empirical base. One is the small number of instances of the construction. Another is the limitation to a single register. It would have been interesting to include academic prose, a register known to be impersonal and to contain more passives than many other registers (Biber *et al.* 1999: 476; Herriman

2000: 220). Such an investigation might probe further into the grammaticalized modal and evidential meanings of the extraposition and parenthetical uses of the impersonal passive. But that will have to be left to a future study.

Corpus material

The English-Norwegian Parallel Corpus (ENPC).
<https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/services/knowledge-resources/omc/>

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